

Analysis: Why new leaders disappoint

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It's inadvisable to promote employees based solely on past performance. And when you do bump them up, you mustn't desert them at the helm.

In what way could the firing and hiring of Della,* an animal shelter manager paid a fairly modest salary, hold important lessons for high-level corporate executives and their boards?

Well, in just about every way, say business consultants. The drama of Della's incompetence has played out with many a high-level corporate officer newly promoted to CEO.

"I see this happen all the time in Corporate America," says Kerry Sulkowicz, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded the Boswell Group, a New York business consulting firm. "A vice-president is promoted to CEO, and then suddenly seems a lot less impressive."

The first defense against this problem is prevention. Sulkowicz believes that whether you're dealing with a 20-employee not-for-profit or a 20,000-employee multinational corporation, your board should always interview outside candidates rather than automatically hiring from within.

"Someone from the outside may have fresh ideas, a new perspective on the job and the organization," Sulkowicz says. So bumping Della up without giving other candidates a chance was the first mistake.

Once the new leader is chosen and in office, it's time for a series of frequent meetings to find out how things are going. In the case of Della, the cat shelter had a comprehensive training manual with all the job's responsibilities laid out, and Della read and signed it. But it wasn't until reports of her negligence surfaced that the board started to look into what metrics she was and wasn't living up to.

"This is such a common problem, it drives me crazy," says Ken Blanchard, co-author of the seminal tome *The One-Minute Manager* and the upcoming *Don't Mark My Paper: Help Me Get an A* (Pearson, 2009). "We promote people and sit back and wait for them to succeed, and it doesn't always happen."

Instead, Blanchard believes in frequent meetings not only to evaluate how newly promoted executives are doing but also to figure out how to help them do the job better. If such meetings had taken place weekly or once every two weeks, the negligence regarding the cat inoculations and adoption applications could have been remedied sooner.

Instead of implementing such a system of review, the shelter board responded to Della's deficiencies by filling the open assistant manager position with someone thought to be capable of compensating for Della's lack of organizational skills.

"It was probably expedient to hire an assistant manager to compensate," says Liz Ryan, a career and human-resources consultant. "But in the long term, it was a way to avoid taking the bull by the horns."

Despite his dedication to helping employees succeed, Blanchard concedes there may be times that call for drastic measures. "I think one of the jobs of the board is to ask: 'Should we fire the president?' If the answer is no, then: 'What do we do to help the president accomplish goals?'" Blanchard says.

But should the dedication to assisting workers apply to the issue of the employee's bringing personal woes to the office on a regular basis?

"That's not good," say Ryan. "If you can't take care of your own life, how are you supposed to be responsible for an organization? And how are the other people who work there supposed to respect you? Instead of lending Della money, they should have given her the money outright and said: 'We're going to make a search for a new manager.'"

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